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ABSTRACT

Considering the rhetorical strategies four 19th-century black women employed to address various audiences can be helpful in the continuing struggle to find effective means of teaching writing to college students. These four women used a variety of strategies to reach audiences which were, to one degree or another, hostile to them because of their race and their gender. An analysis of Maria Stewart's history-making speech at Boston's Franklin Hall in 1832 reveals how dissimilar interests--in her case, political and religious interests--can produce a powerful appeal to action. An analysis of Sojourner Truth's memorable maternal eloquence on the central issues facing mid-century black and white women reveals how her humor and the overwhelming force of her physical presence compelled her audience. Frances Harper's speeches to established women's organizations in the 1890s demonstrate the skill of adapting messages to widely varying groups. In addition to evincing skill in audience accommodation, Harper's 40 year public rhetorical career provides studies in tactics of invention, style, and particularly in delivery. Ida Wells' historic rhetorical campaign against mob violence provides models for stylistic imitation and the force of logical appeal reinforced with statistics and documented reports. Using these speeches in the writing classroom has the additional advantage of giving students the opportunity to hear diverse and frequently silenced voices from earlier times in the classrooms of the 21st century. (SAM)

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Lessons from Four "Bronze Muses" or How the Rhetoric of Nineteenth Century African-American Women Can Inform Writing Instruction in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This paper surveys the rhetorical contributions of four nineteenth-century black women by considering the strategies they employed to address their various audiences. It begins with Maria Stewart's history-making speech at Boston's Franklin Hall in 1832 and ends with Victoria Matthews' "The Value of Race Literature," delivered in Boston, sixty-three years later. After highlighting the major rhetorical features of their speeches, the paper explores the pedagogical possibilities which studying their work invites. This exploration takes place in the context of our continuing struggle to find effective means of teaching writing to college students.

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Lessons from Four "Bronze Muses" or How the Rhetoric of Nineteenth Century African-American Women Can Inform Writing Instruction in the Twenty-First Century

Frances Harper said in a letter to a friend that during some of her speaking engagements, people, amazed at her rhetorical skills, commented: "She is a man; She is not colored, she is white. She is painted." These declarations denied Harper both her gender and her race. They also suggest two major constraints that nineteenth-century African-American women faced whenever they mounted the platform. Even when their race and gender were conceded, these women's intelligence still remained a source of amazement. Here's how a reporter for the New York Independent, Grace Greenwood, described Harper after hearing her speak in Philadelphia: "She has a noble head, this bronze muse; a strong face, with a shadowed glow upon it indicative of thought and of a nature most femininely sensitive, but not in the least morbid.. . . . Greenwood later remarks in particular upon her "intellect, fancy, eloquence, [and] flashing wit."
It is from Greenwood's description of Harper that I take the title of this talk, "Lesson from Four Bronze Muses." Realizing that in some Greek myths there were nine muses, I discovered that one, Polyhymnia, was the muse of singing, rhetoric, and mime. Perhaps we should invoke her presence to preside over this session, or at least my portion of it.

This paper will highlight the rhetorical contributions of four of these nineteenth-century "bronze muses " with emphasis on the strategies they employed to relax these constraints and address their various audiences. I will discuss Maria Stewart and her history-making speech at Boston's Franklin Hall in 1832; Sojourner Truth's memorable maternal eloquence on the central issues facing mid-century black and white women; Frances Harper's speeches to established Northern women's organizations in the 1890's; and finally, Ida Wells' historic rhetorical campaign against mob violence which began in 1892, sixty years after Stewart's debut. As we know, the art of rhetoric essentially systematizes practice and codifies natural ability. Examining these speeches and their rhetorical contexts can teach writers a great deal about what persuades and fails to persuade audiences. Thus, along with the discussion of their oratory, I suggest some pedagogical possibilities which studying their work invites.

Maria W. Stewart

At the age of twenty-nine, Maria Stewart was the first American-born woman to deliver a speech on political issues to a mixed audience. Although she received no formal education, her early years in Connecticut "bound out" in a clergyman's home gave her access to books, possibly including material on the art of public address, and fostered her desire for knowledge. Only three years after marrying and settling in Boson, Stewart was widowed and cheated out of her husband's estate. As a result, she developed a deep commitment to religious and political activism, launching a rhetorical campaign to address the concerns of free Northern blacks. Stewart's oratory was also influenced by the activities of David Walker, whose incendiary Appeal, in Four Articles, appeared in 1829, two years before Stewart's first speech. Although Stewart's exhortations were not as forceful as Walker's, they did urge her audience to engage in the self help and self defense which Walker had advocated. Ending her public career after only one year, Stewart, in her farewell address, alludes to the resistance she must have faced from the black Boston community because of her outspokenness: "I find it is of no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city."

What might there have been about Stewart and her speeches and essays to provoke such a response? How did she attempt to overcome the constraints she surely faced as a woman chastising Northern blacks whom she felt were straying from religious principles, civil and familial responsibi[illegible]s? Perhaps an answer lies in her use of paraphrased biblical passages and allusions to biblical stories. Such borrowing was a common practice during Stewart's time; for example, Angelina Grimké 1838 speech is filled with incorporated biblical material. Given Stewart's spiritual conversion, it was a convention she most certainly would have followed. In all of her speeches she proclaims an undeniable call from God, but this call at times led her to denounce her audiences in strong, uncompromising language: Her opening question to the auditors at Franklin Hall, borrowed from the book of Kings, is confrontational: "Why sit ye here and die?" and in her "Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall" she scolds the black men in her audience: "Talk, without effort, is nothing; you are abundantly capable gentlemen, of making yourselves men of

distinction; and this gross neglect, on your part, causes my blood to boil within me. Here is the grand cause which hinders the rise and progress of people of color. It is their want of laudable ambition and requisite courage."

The force of Stewart's exhortations addressed to her people could well have been too harsh. These were a people living in the shadow of the institution of slavery, not really belonging to the Boston society in which they lived, free only in that there were no warrants out for their arrest as fugitives. As Stewart herself acknowledges, "there are no chains so galling as those that bind the soul." In a composition class, one could discuss the element of tone in establishing a relationship with readers. One could suggest what might be twentieth-century referents, designed to invoke action? One could discuss whether biblical paraphrasings would be as effective today, and suggest contemporary sources of authority. Given the uniqueness of Stewart's rhetorical situation, one wonders how else she could have justified such an improper act? Composition classes could discuss *insinuatio* as an important tactic of arrangement to overcome the reservations of a potentially hostile audience. Stewart's claim to a call from God was her way of claiming a place for herself. How might our students claim writing space today?

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was an imposing figure on the podium. With compelling ethical appeal, she argued in defense of black and white women's rights. Sojourner Truth was born in New York State around 1797. Named Isabella, she was sold away from her parents at the age of nine years, and was subsequently sold to a series of other owners. According to one source, she was married in 1815 and had five children. She escaped from slavery in 1827 and lived with a Quaker family until 1828, when, according to state law, all slaves were to be emancipated. She moved to New York City, became a domestic worker, and joined a religious commune. In 1843, at that time about forty-six years old, Isabella declared herself to be Sojourner Truth, called by God to travel and preach. In this manner she began her career as a lecturer. She traveled and told her story across Long Island, entered Connecticut and then Massachusetts, where she joined the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. While in Massachusetts, sl. met some of

the leading abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, David Ruggles, Parker Pillsbury and Wendell Phillips (Bernard 138-144). During her affiliation with the Association, she "honed her speaking skills . . .entrancing well-educated audiences with her visionary observations" (Patten 3). In 1850, with the help of Olive Gilbert, a friend from the Northampton Association, the Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave was published. Truth sold her story anti-slavery and women's rights gatherings.

In May of 1851, Truth attended the second Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. The only Black woman in attendance, Truth was a spectator on the first day of the gathering, peddling her book at intermission. On the second day, during a particularly stormy session, ministers from several denominations spoke out against the proposed resolutions. Many of the women there did not want Truth to speak for fear that their cause would be damaged by association with the slavery issue. They implored, "Don't let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced. But Truth was allowed to speak and delivered her now famous "Ar'n't I A Woman" speech.

What can students of rhetoric and writing learn from this 19th century traveler, who, according to her own testimony, never learned to read or write? In addition to her basic appeal to common sense and to per personal experience, perhaps the lesson to be learned from Truth is the importance of ethos in persuading her audience. Comments from Frederick Douglass (Moses, Alexander Crummell) and recently uncovered reports from contemporary newspapers indicate that Truth's "character" may have been her intentional creation (Campbell). She can be viewed as a kind of trickster figure, who, heightened her persona as an illiterate black woman speaking from the soul. (See Painter 1990 & Haraway 1992.) She may have known that such a persona was easier for her white audiences to accept, and she addressed her audience with such maternal phrases as "Well, children" and "My friends, and referred to herself as "Old Sojourner." Reports from the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention and others suggest that the white women loved her, and even today we can find her poster on the walls of Women Studies offices. But what is the

source of her appeal, an appeal that formally educated black women like Frances Harper did not invoke? Consider this response to her 1851 speech: "She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty," Gage's reaction suggests that the women, instead of finding empowerment in Truth's speech, were merely substituting this old black woman as their rescuer, while they remained "powerless rescued female victims" (Yellin, Women & Sisters). The persona Truth created can teach twentieth students of composition new strategies of appeal and accommodation.

Frances Harper

Frances Harper's rhetorical career spanned over forty years and brought her in front of white, black, male, female, rich, poor, Northern, and Southern audiences. Her speeches also demonstrate the skill of adapting messages to widely varying groups, or the art of audience accommodation, and provide studies in tactics of invention, style, and particularly in delivery.

Born in 1825, Harper lost her parents when she was three. She was raised by her uncle William Watkins, minister and head of the Watkins' Academy for Negro Youth, which she attended. She studied the Bible, the classics, grammar, reading, writing, natural philosophy, music, mathematics, and elocution. She attended abolitionists meetings with her cousins, who were well known for their oratorical skills. Her uncle frequently contributed articles to such papers as Garrison's Liberator and organized a literary society. At the age of 13, Harper took a job as a seamstress and nursemaid with the Armstrongs, who owned a bookshop. In her spare time, she read. At 26, she left Baltimore and began teaching, first in Ohio and later in Pennsylvania. Largely because of an incident involving a free black sold into slavery, Harper gave up teaching and become a lecturer for the abolitionist cause. She lectured throughout the United States for almost 60 years, from 1854 until her death in 1911.

Anecdotal evidence attests to her compelling delivery. We have the description from journalist Grace Greenwood, who called her the "bronze muse." "She . . . speaks without notes, with gestures few and fitting. Her manner is marked by dignity and composure. She is never assuming, never theatrical." Blyden Jackson, twentieth-century scholar of African-American

culture says of her manner: "Harper's appeal as a lecturer was quite understandable. Her appearance aided her greatly. She was anything but an unsightly female, no titaness in size, with a fair figure, long, lustrous hair, and facial features pleasant to behold. Moreover, she did not overdo her performance as an employer of elocutionary skills. She was sparing, if graceful of gesture. She avoided ranting. And while she was deeply committed to enlightening America as she believed with all her might she should, she was not given to speaking above the level of capacity for understanding ideas of those who had altered the normal pattern of their lives in order to take the time and trouble required to attend a meeting at which she would speak. [emphasis mine]" Jackson's sexism aside, these comments do suggest the source of Harper's ethical appeal-- her stage presence, the fact that she met conventional standards of "true womanhood," possibly making her strong messages more palatable to her Northern audiences of white women. Providing here still another model of audience accommodation.

She drew from the common topic of comparison in her 1857 address to the New York City Anti-Slavery Society. She rails against the Fugitive Slave Law which prevented her from returning to her home state of Maryland commenting that under any other flag, a fugitive slave recently returned to a slaveholder would have found refuge. She insisted that "between the white people and the colored there is a community of interests, and the sooner they find it out, the better it will be for both parties." thereby focusing on similarities and differences between the white women and black women. Culminating in her decision to support the 15th amendment.

Harper speeches also demonstrate the persuasiveness of the figures. For example, antithesis, one of her most frequent rhetorical structures, possibly stems from her need to compare opposites, to show how the women in her Northern white audiences were alike yet different from the people for whom she spoke. Here are two examples:

> Underlying this racial question . . . . is one controlling idea, not simply that the negro is ignorant; *that* .he is outgrowing; not that he is incapable of valor in war or adaptation in peace. But [that] he holds in this Republic the position of an alien race among a people impatient of a rival."

An in a later speech: "It is not through sex but through character that the best influence of women upon the life of the nation must be exerted."

Ida Wells

Probably the most outspoken and direct of all of these women, Ida Wells critiqued the causes of mob violence in this country at the turn of the century. She was confrontational, but unlike Stewart, who condemned the failures of Northern blacks, her attacks were launched against the collective silence of American citizens who allowed lynching to continue. She, along with Frances Harper and six other black women, attended the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. But while her contemporaries were delivering speeches, Wells positioned herself in front of the Haitian Pavilion, where Frederick Douglass was presiding, and distributed copies of an eighty-one page protest pamphlet with the telling title, The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition. In addition, Wells spoke out against the denial of women's rights, against racism generally, over a period of almost forty years, until her death in 1931.

She was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on July 16, 1862. the oldest of eight children. After emancipation, when Wells was sixteen, a yellow fever epidemic took the lives of her parents and her youngest brother. To keep her family together, she obtained a teaching job and eventually moving to Memphis. Her first years in Tennessee provided many opportunities to practice defiance. In May of 1884, when the conductor tried to remove her forcibly to the smoking car of a train, she resisted and brought a law suit against the railroad. This incident highlighted the rebellion and defiance characterizing Wells's lifelong struggle for personal and racial dignity.

After a brief teaching stint, she devoted herself to journalism full-time, soon becoming known as the "Princess of the Press." for her scathing editorials in her newspaper, The Free Speech. During this period of Wells's budding career as a journalist, three of her close friends were lynched, and this act of violence changed the direction of her life and launched her speaking campaign.

In less than a year, Wells had occasion to relate her Memphis experience to two sharply different audiences. A study of her speeches to these audiences can provide a lesson in contrastive rhetoric for twentieth century students of writing and rhetoric. The first audience was a group of

prominent activist black women who had gathered in her support. The other to the Boston Monday lectureship, to a group of men and women who were unfamiliar with the particulars of the case and who were inclined to be less sympathetic. In both instances, Wells assumed the persona of investigative reporter, wanting the facts to speak for themselves. She was especially wary of emotional display. Delivering the Lyric Hall speech, at the testimonial in her honor organized by black women, she was annoyed that, when she described the murders of her three friends in Memphis, she began to cry. She commented: "Whatever my feelings, I am not given to public demonstrations. And only once before in all my life had I given way to woman's weakness in public" (Wells 80). The final appeal in "Lynch Law" is in keeping with Wells's insistence that the facts themselves must make the case. She opens her speech with a practical appeal: don't act out of pity or even out of a sense of justice, closing with a quote from one of the nation's most patriotic songs, Wells ends her speech with the same appeal with which she opened, an appeal to the desire to preserve democracy.

From Wells one can learn the force of logical appeal, reinforced with statistics and documented reports. She chose to let the descriptions of mob violence do the work of persuasion for her. In keeping with her direct approach, she advised her black audiences to arm themselves with Winchester rifles, to actively investigate reports of lynching, to boycott business which supported such violence and to leave jurisdictions where perpetrators of violence were not punished.

Conclusion

What can these early women rhetors teach us about the practice of argumentative discourse today? From Maria Stewart we can learn the strategies of conflating dissimilar interests--in her case, religious and political interests--to produce a powerful appeal to action. Sojourner Truth's humor and the overwhelming force of her physical presence compelled her auditors. She adapted a maternal and advisory stance to address audiences comprised or well-educated women. Anna Cooper, one of rhetors we will not have time to discuss, produced speeches exemplary as models of arrangement and powerful metadiscourse. She adopted a more "teacherly" tone than any of the

other women, always guiding and instructing. The varying ways in which Harper and Wells both addressed the problem of mob violence at the close of the century can instruct students in accommodating material to widely different audiences. Their speeches also provide models for stylistic imitation and application.

Now we all know that imitation is not a new method of improving writing. It was recommended in ancient rhetorics; its practice by Roman schoolchildren is well-documented, and it is likely that rhetorical training, including *imitatio*, was also the practice in cultures pre-dating Greece, as suggested by Martin Bernal in Black Athena. What I am proposing is new models--speeches and essays by nineteenth-century African-American women. Using these speeches in the writing classroom has the additional advantage of giving students the opportunity to hear diverse and frequently silenced voices from earlier times in the classrooms of the twenty-first century.

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